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AUTHOR Linton, Thomas H.

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ABSTRACT

The accountability subset of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was studied over 4 years to identify trends that might explain why the 1999 TAAS passing rate did not decrease as was predicted. Expanding the accountability index in those years to include special education students was expected to cause a decline in the TAAS accountability subset, with passing rates expected to drop by about 5%. Data were collected from the state and region academic excellence indicator system. Data showed that the percent of special education students increased both at the state and regional levels from 1996 to 1999. Data also showed that the percent of minority students identified as needing special education was consistently higher than the percentage for white students over the 4 years. In addition, males were almost twice as likely to be classified as special education students. The passing rate remained constant in reading and increased in mathematics and writing. In 1999, the percent of special education students receiving exemptions from the TAAS increased significantly. A causal connection has not been established, but it seems probable that the two events are related. School districts across Texas may have increased exemption rates for special education students to reduce the impact on the accountability subset. Some of the issues raised for the identification of special education students and their exemption from the TAAS are discussed. (SLD)

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HIGH STAKES TESTING IN TEXAS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF INCLUDING SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE TEXAS ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE INDICATOR SYSTEM

BY
THOMAS H. LINTON, PH.D.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR THE
SOUTH TEXAS EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-CORPUS CHRISTI

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HIGH STAKES TESTING IN TEXAS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF INCLUDING SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE TEXAS ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE INDICATOR SYSTEM

The State of Texas is divided into twenty geographic regions; each served by an education service center. Region 2 is a 10 county area in south Texas with 44 school districts and a total enrollment of 110,600 students. The ethnic makeup of Region 2 is 64.9% Hispanic, 3.8% African-American, 30.0% white, and 1.3% other. Thirteen percent of the students are classified as special education and 6.9% are limited English proficient (LEP).

School districts in Region 2, like all other public school districts in Texas have been required to administer the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test on an annual basis since 1990-91. The TAAS consists of criterion referenced tests in reading, math, and writing. In 1994-95 the tests were revised and additional grades added to the testing schedule. In its present form, the TAAS is administered to all eligible public school students in grades three through eight and grade ten.

The TAAS tests are an integral component of the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) which is an integrated accountability system required by the State of Texas. This accountability system is used by the Texas Education Agency to evaluate and report the performance of public school districts and individual campuses. Campuses and districts are rated as Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, or Low Performing on the basis of TAAS scores and other selected criteria.

The Texas Education Agency excluded the TAAS scores for certain categories of students when calculating the campus rating. Prior to 1999, these included:

- Students who were not enrolled in the district on the snapshot date (the last Friday in the previous October)
- Special Education students
- Bilingual/ESL students exempt from testing by the Language Proficiency Advisory Committee (LPAC)

The set of TAAS scores that remained after scores for these student groups were deleted was called the accountability subset and was used in the calculation of campus and district ratings. In 1999 the accountability subset was expanded to include special education students and all bilingual students tested with the Spanish TAAS at grades 3 and 4. (1999 Accountability Manual)

The Texas Education Agency projected that expanding the accountability subset would result in significant decreases the percent of students passing TAAS. In Region 2, the percent of students passing the reading subtest was projected to drop from 86.1% in 1998 to 81.5% in 1999. Similarly, the percent projected to pass the math subtest would decrease from 83.0% to 78.4% and the percent projected to pass the writing subtest would decrease from 87.3% to 82.7%. (1998 and 1999 AEIS: Region 2 Performance Reports, Section I, p.4)

A comparison of actual 1999 passing rates with 1999 projected passing rates in Region 2 revealed that the percent of students passing the reading, math, and writing subtests was higher than projected. In fact, it was actually higher than the 1998 passing rate in math and writing. In order to determine if the findings for Region 2 were unique, Statewide results and results from Region 1 (another south Texas region with similar demographic characteristics) were used as comparison groups. Table 1 shows that, while the passing rates varied among the three groups (State, Region 2, and Region 1) the overall pattern for the three groups was similar for each TAAS subtest.

The Problem

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) requires that all students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10 take the TAAS test unless they are exempt by a legally recognized committee. Bilingual students must take either the English or Spanish versions of the TAAS unless they are exempt from testing by their Language Proficiency Advisory Committee (LPAC). Special education students must take the TAAS unless they are exempt from testing by their Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee.

Prior to 1999 TEA provided separate TAAS reports for special education students and non-special education students. The TAAS scores for special education students were not used in the accountability subset for the AEIS accountability system. In 1999 the TEA expanded the accountability subset by including special education students' scores. Since special education students have historically had lower passing rates than non-special education students, TEA projected that the passing rate for the accountability subset would drop by approximately 5% in reading, math, and writing. The passing rate in Region 2, the State, and Region 1 not only failed to drop, but actually equaled or exceeded the 1998 passing rate on every subtest. These results indicate that, contrary to expectations, including special education students in the TAAS accountability subset had little impact on school and district TAAS passing rates across the State.

TABLE 1

PROJECTED AND ACTUAL PERCENT OF STUDENTS PASSING TAAS
AEIS ACCOUNTABILITY SUBSETS FOR
1998 AND 1999

Subject	Dates	Total Passing	African-Am	Hispanic	White	Native-Am	Asian
TEXAS							
Reading	1998 Actual	87.0	78.2	79.5	94.2	88.7	93.0
	1999 Project	83.3	74.8	74.8	91.3	84.7	92.2
	1999 Actual	86.5	78.2	79.5	93.7	87.3	93.6
Math	1998 Actual	84.2	70.5	77.7	91.9	85.7	94.3
	1999 Project	80.4	67.0	73.3	88.6	81.2	93.4
	1999 Actual	85.7	72.8	80.7	92.5	85.4	95.4
Writing	1998 Actual	87.4	80.4	80.9	93.4	87.2	92.4
	1999 Project	84.2	77.0	77.4	90.1	82.6	91.7
	1999 Actual	88.2	81.9	83.1	93.1	88.3	92.7
REGION 2							
Reading	1998 Actual	86.1	83.7	81.9	94.3	84.0	91.9
	1999 Project	81.5	76.7	76.9	90.7	78.9	90.3
	1999 Actual	86.0	82.5	82.5	93.4	90.6	92.8
Math	1998 Actual	83.0	75.0	78.6	92.3	80.0	92.4
	1999 Project	78.4	68.7	73.7	88.3	74.1	90.3
	1999 Actual	84.9	77.8	81.4	92.5	86.3	94.8
Writing	1998 Actual	87.3	85.1	84.2	93.0	82.6	93.9
	1999 Project	82.7	77.8	79.5	88.7	75.0	92.7
	1999 Actual	87.8	82.3	85.7	92.4	84.5	91.3
REGION 1							
Reading	1998 Actual	81.0	85.2	80.1	95.7	87.3	95.8
	1999 Project	75.9	83.6	74.8	93.3	83.1	95.1
	1999 Actual	81.5	90.0	80.7	95.2	83.3	97.4
Math	1998 Actual	81.4	81.0	80.5	93.9	89.5	97.2
	1999 Project	76.6	79.2	75.7	91.3	79.4	96.5
	1999 Actual	84.5	90.1	83.9	94.2	86.6	99.0
Writing	1998 Actual	84.0	90.7	83.2	95.2	66.7	93.7
	1999 Project	80.4	88.6	79.5	92.7	66.7	91.8
	1999 Actual	85.2	92.4	84.5	95.7	84.2	98.2

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the TAAS accountability subset over a four year period in order to identify trends that might explain why the 1999 TAAS passing rate did not decrease as predicted. The study included an analysis of changes in the accountability subset related to student ethnicity and gender. Specifically, the study compared the accountability subsets of TAAS scores for Region 2, the State, and Region 1 for 1999 with the accountability subsets for the previous three years to determine if:

- the percent of students taking the TAAS changed in 1999.
- the percent of students in the TAAS accountability subset increased as projected in 1999.
- the percent of special education students receiving exemptions from the TAAS increased in 1999.

Specific research questions to be answered were:

1. Was the Statewide and regional percent of students taking the TAAS reading, math, and writing subtests constant from 1996 to 1999?
2. Did the percent of students included in the TAAS accountability subset increase as projected in 1999?
3. Was the percent of students classified as special education students constant from 1996 to 1999?
4. Was the percent of special education students tested with the TAAS constant from 1996 to 1999?
5. Was the percent of special education students exempt from the TAAS by the ARD committee constant from 1996 to 1999?

Procedures

Data for the study were collected from two sources: the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) Reports for the State and for Region 1 and Region 2 Education Service Centers for 1996-1999, and from the Texas Education Agency Office of Accountability. Custom TAAS participation Reports were prepared by John Haetinger of the TEA Office of Accountability. Specific sections of the AEIS report utilized in the study were the Accountability Subset Tables, the TAAS Participation Tables, and the TAAS Preview Indicator Tables. (in the 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999 AEIS State Performance Reports, Section I)

Results

The total percent of students tested with the TAAS from 1996 to 1999 is presented in Table 2. Students from Region 2 have been disaggregated by ethnicity and gender and compared to the State and Region 1. Table 2 shows that, over the last four years, Region 2 school districts have tested a greater percentage of their students than either the State or Region 1 school districts. This difference is primarily due to differences in

exemption rates for LEP/ESL students. LEP exemption rates for Region 2 varied from 0.5-0.2% for these four years. The State reported a LEP exemption rate of 2-3% from 1996 to 1999 while Region 1 reported a LEP exemption rate of 8.8% in 1996 and a rate of 4.2-4.7% from 1997 to 1999. In other words, LEP exemptions were essentially flat from 1996 to 1999 in each of the three regions. Therefore, any year to year fluctuations within a region were attributable to differences in the percent of special education students tested.

TABLE 2

PERCENT OF STUDENTS TAKING TAAS

		PERCENT TESTED			
		1996	1997	1998	1999
All Students					
	Texas	89.6	90.6	91.1	89.3
	Region 2	94.3	94.5	93.9	91.2
	Region 1	83.4	87.4	88.8	85.6
Black					
	Texas	88.4	88.4	88.5	86.6
	Region 2	91.2	91.0	90.9	87.9
	Region 1	92.5	93.8	94.3	92.2
Hispanic					
	Texas	83.6	86.2	87.2	85.4
	Region 2	93.3	93.7	92.8	89.9
	Region 1	82.7	87.0	88.4	85.2
White					
	Texas	94.6	94.8	95.0	93.4
	Region 2	96.6	96.6	96.5	94.3
	Region 1	95.9	96.0	95.7	94.6
Male					
	Texas	87.7	88.7	89.3	87.1
	Region 1	81.2	85.0	86.6	83.0
	Region 2	93.0	93.2	92.5	89.0
Female					
	Texas	91.6	92.5	92.9	91.6
	Region 2	95.8	96.0	95.5	93.6
	Region 1	85.8	90.1	91.0	88.4

- Was the Statewide and regional percent of students taking the TAAS reading, math, and writing subsets constant from 1996 to 1999?

Table 2 shows that for each of the three geographic groups (the State, Region 2, and Region 1) the percent of students tested was relatively constant from 1996 to 1998 and declined slightly (about 2 percent) in 1999. When the data was disaggregated by ethnicity the percent tested for the State and for Region 1 remained the same or increased slightly from 1996 to 1998, then decreased in 1999. In Region 2, the percent tested remained the same in 1996 and 1997, then decreased slightly in 1998 and decreased again in 1999. For Hispanic and African-Americans there was a 2%-3% decrease in percent tested from 1998 to 1999 in contrast to a 1%-2% decrease for

whites. When the data were disaggregated by gender the pattern was similar. That is, the percent tested increased from 1996 to 1998 for both males and females, then decreased in 1999. The data also revealed that about 4% fewer males than females were tested in each of the last four years.

- Did the percent of students included in the TAAS accountability subset increase as projected in 1999?

For the State, Region 2, and Region 1, there was a projected 10%-12% increase in the percent of students in the accountability subset from 1998 to 1999. However, Table 3 shows that the actual increase was only 7%-8%. In other words, approximately 2% to 3% fewer students were included in the accountability subset than had been projected. AEIS Reports for the State, Region 2, and Region 1 show that the difference was due to a 2% to 3% drop in the percent of special education students tested from 1998 to 1999. The data also showed that the accountability subset for each ethnic group increased from 1998 to 1999 and that the increase was about 2% to 3% less than had been projected.

TABLE 3

PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN ACCOUNTABILITY SUBSET

		1996	1997	1998	1999 Projected	1999
All Students						
	Texas	74.0	76.0	76.0	86.1	84.2
	Region 2	78.7	79.8	79.1	89.5	86.4
	Region 1	68.4	71.4	72.0	83.8	80.4
Black						
	Texas	73.4	75.6	74.9	83.3	81.2
	Region 2	71.4	73.5	71.9	84.6	82.4
	Region 1	72.6	79.0	74.5	83.6	83.3
Hispanic						
	Texas	66.8	69.6	69.9	82.1	79.9
	Region 2	78.5	79.4	78.6	88.9	85.8
	Region 1	67.8	70.9	71.5	83.5	80.1
White						
	Texas	79.9	81.2	81.2	90.8	89.0
	Region 2	80.2	82.0	81.3	89.0	88.6
	Region 1	82.4	83.3	83.7	91.3	89.7
Male						
	Texas	70.1	71.9	71.9	84.6	82.1
	Region 1	64.5	67.3	67.9	81.6	77.9
	Region 2	74.7	75.7	74.7	88.1	84.4
Female						
	Texas	78.3	80.3	80.4	88.0	86.5
	Region 2	83.0	84.2	83.9	91.0	88.6
	Region 1	72.7	75.9	76.3	85.9	83.1

The disaggregated data also revealed that there were significant differences between the accountability subsets of the three ethnic groups. For the State, Region 2, and Region 1 the percent of students in the accountability subset for African-Americans was 6%-8% less than the accountability subset for whites. Similarly, there were differences between the accountability subsets of Hispanics and whites. These differences varied significantly for the State, Region 1, and Region 2. These were primarily due to different exemption rates for LEP/ESL students in the three regions.

When the data was disaggregated by gender, the accountability subset for males was about 4% less than the accountability subset for females in all three geographic regions. There was approximately an 8% increase in the accountability subsets of both males and females from 1998 to 1999. This increase was 2%-3% less than projected.

- Was the percent of students classified as special education constant from 1996 to 1999?

Table 4 presents the percent of special education students for in Region 2, the State, and Region 1 from 1996 to 1999. In Region 2, the percent of special education students increased in each of the four years from 1996 to 1999. In contrast, the percent of special education students identified by the State and Region 1 increased from 1996 to 1998 and then decreased slightly in 1999. However, the four-year trend showed an increase of 1%-2% in the percent of special education students.

When the students were disaggregated by ethnic group, a higher percentage of minority students were classified as special education than whites. In Region 2, 18.9% of the African-American students, 15.7% of the Hispanic students and 12.9% of the white students were classified as special education in 1999. At the State level, the percentages were 18.2% for African-American, 13.4% for Hispanic, and 13.8% for white students.

TABLE 4

PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION					
		1996	1997	1998	1999
All Students					
	Texas	13.2	13.5	13.9	13.8
	Region 2	12.9	13.6	14.5	15.0
	Region 1	11.5	12.5	13.0	12.9
Black					
	Texas	17.0	17.2	18.1	18.2
	Region 2	17.8	18.4	19.7	18.9
	Region 1	8.0	12.7	11.8	14.9
Hispanic					
	Texas	12.5	13.1	13.5	13.4
	Region 2	13.2	14.2	15.2	15.7
	Region 1	11.7	12.7	13.2	13.0
White					
	Texas	13.0	13.3	13.4	13.3
	Region 2	11.9	12.2	12.9	12.9
	Region 1	9.4	10.4	10.5	10.3
Male					
	Texas	17.1	17.5	18.0	17.8
	Region 2	16.9	17.7	18.9	19.3
	Region 1	15.2	16.3	16.9	16.7
Female					
	Texas	9.0	9.3	9.5	9.6
	Region 2	8.5	9.3	9.9	10.3
	Region 1	7.7	8.4	8.9	8.9

When the data were disaggregated by gender, 19.3% of the males and 9.9% of the females in Region 2 were classified as special education in 1999. This pattern is consistent with the percentages reported for the State and for Region 1. The four-year trend for Region 2 shows a consistent increase in the percent of both males and females classified as special education. By comparison, the State and Region 1 showed a steady increase from 1996 to 1998 and a slight decrease in 1999.

In summary, the data showed that the percent of special education students increased both at the State and regional level from 1996 to 1999. It also showed that the percent of minority students identified as special education was consistently higher than the percentage for white students over the last four year. Furthermore, the data revealed a significant gender difference. Males were almost twice as likely to be classified as special education as females.

- Was the percent of special education students tested constant from 1996 to 1999?

- Was the percent of special education students exempted by the ARD committee constant from 1996 to 1999?

Tables 5 and 6 present the percent of special education students tested and the percent exempt from testing from 1996 to 1999. In Region 2, over 70% of the special education students were tested and fewer than 30% exempt from testing during 1996 to 1998. In contrast, in 1999 the percent tested fell to 52.7% and the percent exempted increased to 47.3%. This represents an 18.3% increase in exemptions from 1998 to 1999. A similar pattern was found in Region 1, where the percent of students receiving exemptions decreased gradually from 1996 to 1998, then increased by 19.7% in 1999. At the State level, the percent of students receiving exemptions increased by 12.5% in 1999.

TABLE 5

PERCENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS TAKING TAAS

		1996	1997	1998	1999
All Students					
	Texas	58.3	60.7	62.6	50.0
	Region 2	72.1	73.5	71.0	52.7
	Region 1	51.3	52.8	58.5	38.8
Black					
	Texas	44.1	44.2	47.0	36.3
	Region 2	64.0	61.4	65.0	46.6
	Region 1	55.0	64.6	77.1	57.0
Hispanic					
	Texas	52.8	56.5	59.3	44.0
	Region 2	68.9	71.1	67.1	48.4
	Region 1	50.4	52.0	57.6	37.7
White					
	Texas	67.7	69.9	71.6	60.2
	Region 2	80.7	81.1	80.6	65.1
	Region 1	71.3	72.1	71.4	61.2
Male					
	Texas	58.5	60.6	62.8	50.0
	Region 2	72.8	74.0	70.9	52.8
	Region 1	51.3	52.8	57.4	38.9
Female					
	Texas	57.8	60.2	62.1	49.0
	Region 2	71.8	73.1	70.7	52.4
	Region 1	51.9	53.6	59.6	38.2

TABLE 6

PERCENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION EXEMPT FROM TAAS

		1996	1997	1998	1999
All Students					
	Texas	41.7	39.3	37.4	50.0
	Region 2	27.9	26.5	29.0	47.3
	Region 1	48.7	47.2	41.5	61.2
Black					
	Texas	55.9	55.8	53.0	63.7
	Region 2	36.0	38.6	35.0	53.4
	Region 1	45.0	35.4	22.9	43.0
Hispanic					
	Texas	47.2	43.5	40.7	56.0
	Region 2	31.1	28.9	32.9	51.6
	Region 1	49.6	48.0	42.4	62.3
White					
	Texas	32.3	30.1	28.4	39.8
	Region 2	19.3	18.9	19.4	34.9
	Region 1	28.7	27.9	28.6	38.8
Male	Texas	41.5	39.4	37.2	50.0
	Region 2	27.2	26.0	29.1	47.2
	Region 1	48.7	47.2	42.6	61.1
Female	Texas	42.2	39.8	37.9	51.0
	Region 2	28.2	26.9	29.3	47.6
	Region 1	48.1	46.4	40.4	61.8

When the data were disaggregated by ethnicity, Table 6 shows that the four-year trend in exemption rates was similar for all three ethnic groups. From 1996 to 1998 the percent of students receiving exemptions decreased or showed little change. In 1999 every ethnic group had significant increases in the percent of exemptions. There were, however, significant differences in the exemption rates of minorities and whites. Every year from 1996 to 1999, a greater percentage of minority students were exempt from testing than were white students. Among minority students, African-Americans were more likely to be exempt than Hispanic students. In 1999 almost two-thirds of African-American special education students received exemptions from testing.

When the data were disaggregated by gender, the exemption rates differed significantly for Region 2, the State, and Region 1. However, the exemption rates for males and females within each regional and state group were very similar in each of the four years.

Summary

The data show that clear trends in the percent of students taking the TAAS and the percent in the accountability subset are present in the four years from 1996 to 1999. In

Region 2, the State, and Region 1 there were only slight variations in the percent of students tested in 1996-98 and a decrease in the percent tested in 1999. The decrease in percent of students tested in 1999 coincided with the inclusion of special education students in the TAAS accountability subset.

The percent of students included in the TAAS accountability subset increased in 1999 because special education students who took the TAAS were included for the first time. Furthermore, the 1999 TAAS Accountability Report showed that both the number and percent of special education students increased from 1998 to 1999. On this basis, TEA projected a 10%-12% increase in the percent of students in the accountability subset in 1999. However, the percent of students in the accountability subset was 2%-3% less than projected for all ethnic and gender groups. This finding was consistent for Region 2, the State, and Region 1 and would seem to indicate that, although the percent of special education students remained relatively constant, fewer special education students were tested than had been projected.

A four-year trend analysis of special education students supported this conclusion. The data showed that the percent of special education students tested increased 1996 to 1998 and decreased sharply in 1999. The percent of students receiving exemptions generally declined from 1996 to 1998 and increased sharply in 1999.

Analysis of the data by ethnic group indicated that African-American and Hispanic groups tended to have higher percentages of students placed in special education than white students. Furthermore, African-American and Hispanic students were more likely to receive exemptions from the TAAS by their ARD committee. These were not isolated trends since they were found in Region 2, the State, and in Region 1. Statewide, almost two-thirds of the African-American students and one-half of the Hispanic students in special education were exempt from the TAAS. In contrast, fewer than 40% of white special education students received exemptions.

Analysis of the data by gender revealed that males were twice as likely to be classified as special education than females. This finding was consistent for the State, Region 2, and Region 1 in each of the 4 years in the study. However, no gender differences were found when exemption rates for males and females were compared.

Conclusions

In 1999 the TAAS accountability subset, used by TEA to calculate school rankings and passing rates, was enlarged to include special education students. TEA predicted that the change would cause 1999 TAAS passing rates to drop by about 5%. The predicted drop failed to materialize, as the passing rate remained constant in reading and increased in math and writing. Also in 1999, the percent of special education students receiving exemptions from the TAAS increased significantly. While a causal connection has not been established, it seems likely that the two events are related. Based on the available data, it is reasonable to suspect that school districts across the State increased the exemption rates for special education students in 1999 in order to

minimize the impact of including them in the accountability subset of the AEIS. This would not be particularly startling since the TAAS is a high stakes test and school personnel feel tremendous pressure to produce high test scores. It does, however, raise some troubling philosophical and ethical issues. If school districts exempt special education students from the TAAS in order to achieve and maintain high passing rates and school rankings, the focus of testing shifts from the question of "is the test a valuable experience for the child?" to "will the child's test score contribute to the school's test scores and AEIS ranking?" The ripple effect of such a shift would inevitably affect special educational placement decisions and curriculum content offerings for special education students.

The study identified several additional issues, which should be of concern to Texas educators. The following trends in the data merit further investigation.

- the percent of students identified as special education has increased over the last 4 years and 13.8% of TAAS eligible students in Texas were classified as special education in 1999. These percentages seem high since the literature indicates that about 10% of the student population should be classified as special education.

- the percentage of students identified as special education differed significantly across ethnic groups. One of every five African-American students in the State was classified as special education. In contrast, one of every 7 Hispanics and whites students was classified as special education.

- there is a significant gender difference in the percentage of identified special education students. The data showed that two of every three special education students in Texas were male.

- TAAS exemption rates differed significantly across ethnic groups. In Texas, 63.7% of the African-Americans and 56.0% of the Hispanics in special education were exempt from the TAAS. In contrast, 39.8% of the white special education students were exempt.

These trends were consistent across State and regional data and indicate widespread racial/ethnic and gender differences in the special education population in Texas. The data presented in this study indicates that there is a need to review the whole process of identifying special education students to insure that selection criteria are free from ethnic/racial and gender bias.

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